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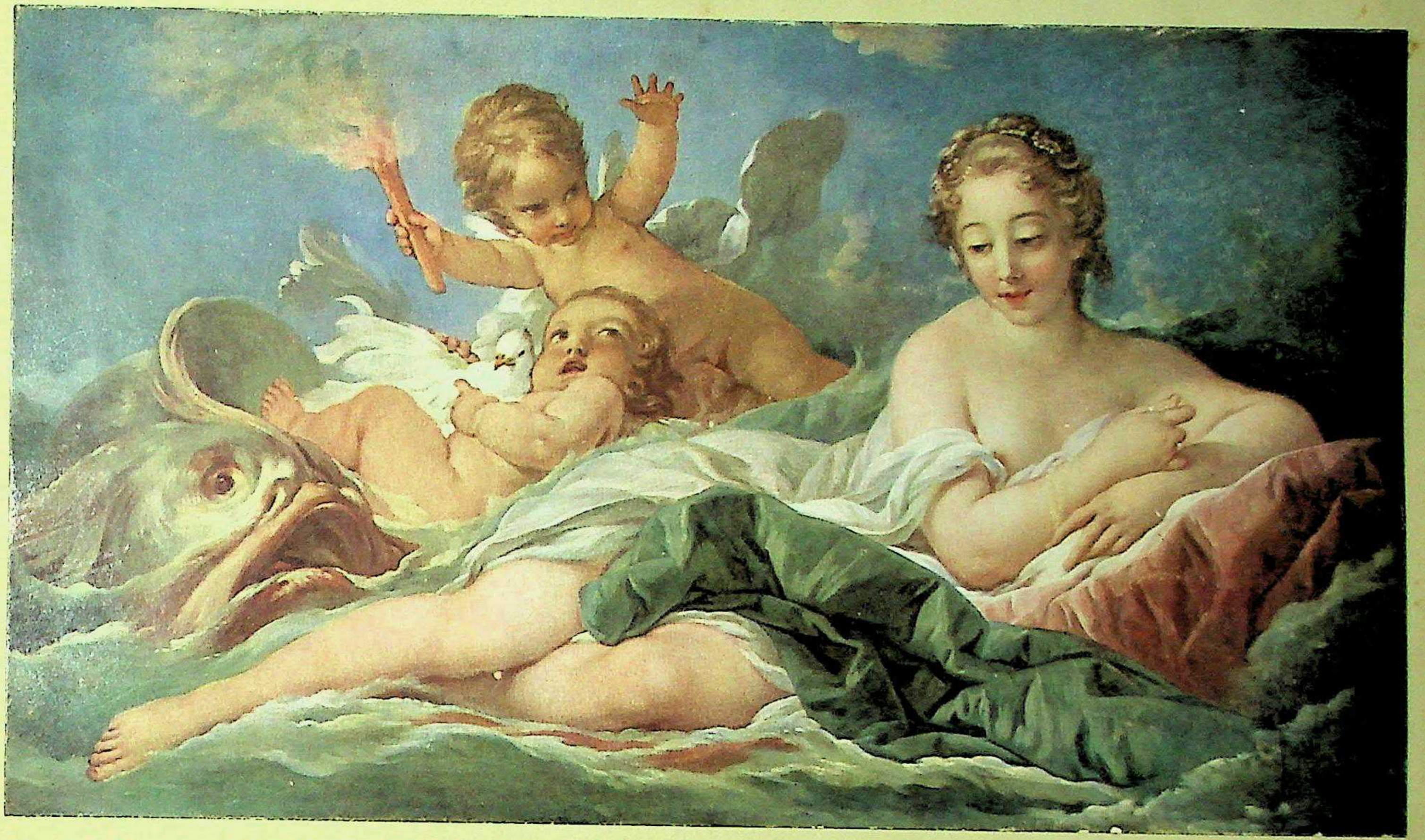

HOMAGE TO VENUS

with an introduction and notes by

JAMES LAVER

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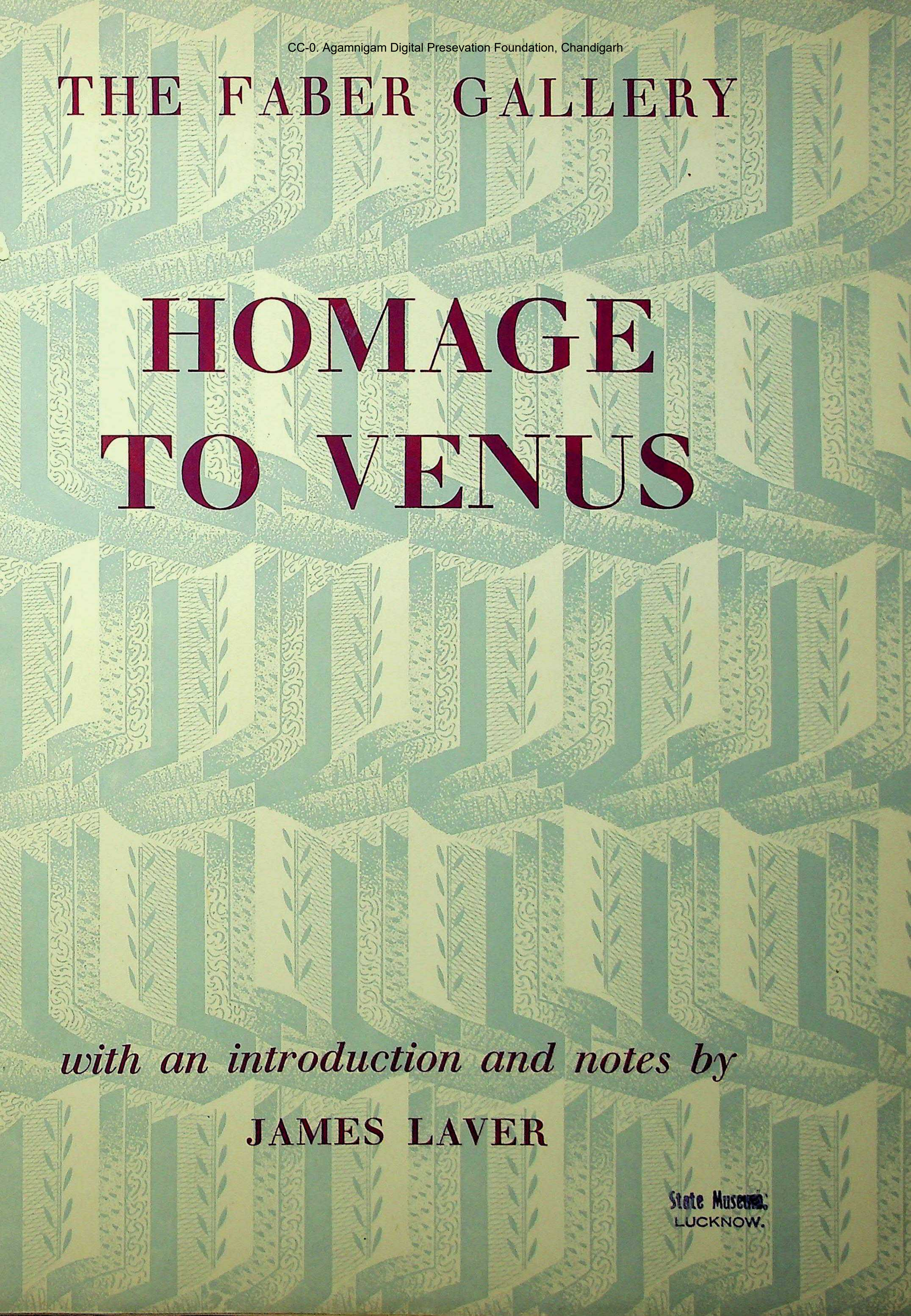

THE FABER GALLERY

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VENUS

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Introduction by James Laver

Had we only Homer to rely upon we should think of Venus merely as the daughter of Jupiter and Dione. It was Hesiod who preserved for us the more primitive legend of Venus born from the waves of the sea. This is the Oriental story (Lakshmi too is born of the churning of the ocean) and it is also the more profound, in spite of its crudity or perhaps because of it. The ancient East had many intuitions of the nature of things; and modern science often does no more than clothe in precise language what the symbolism of mythology had already apprehended and expressed. The Heavenly Seed falling into the Sea of Matter is a pregnant allegory that persists even in the minds of materialists. Yet this is but half the story. For Venus is not the Goddess of Life but the Goddess of Love. And love is the conjunction of individual opposites. Venus arose from the foam at the water's edge, a creature of sea and earth. From the whirlpool of life as it broke upon land, Love was born.

Ever since the first dawn of thought gleamed upon the dark landscape of the instincts, man has regarded woman with a mixture of attraction and awe. Woman as the Gate of Life; Woman as the Object of Desire: between these two poles have his emotions swung. She was at once the great Mother and the Universal Mistress; and in both capacities charged with *mana*. The body of woman has always been heavy with magic, mysterious as life itself. Somehow it was more deeply imbedded in Nature than man's own body, more responsive to its rhythms. And if individual woman, how much more the Great Goddess.

The early history of deities resembles their latter end. In the beginning they are all One by lack of differentiation, as in the end they are all One by deliberate assimilation and synthesis. It is only in the middle period that they have, so to say, a legend of their own; only then that there is any meaning in the Judgment of Paris. For in primitive, as in syncretistic times, the images of the Three merge and dissolve into one another. Venus may hold the spear and Minerva has no monopoly of the moon. The lunar divinity, which all the Semitic peoples worshipped, was also the goddess of universal fertility. She was Mylitta at Babylon, Istar in Assyria, Astarte among the Phoenicians and Atargates at Ascolon. She was also Aphrodite among the Greeks:

'For the Phrygians call me the mother of the Gods: the Athenians, Minerva: the Cyprians, Venus: the Candians, Diana: the Sicilians, Proserpina: the Eleusians, Ceres: some Juno, others Bellona, others Hecate: and principally the Ethiopians which dwell in the Orient, and the Ægyptians which are excellent in all kinds of ancient doctrine, and by their proper ceremonies accustome to worship me, doe call me Queene Isis."*

It was in the pre-Homeric Age that her cult spread over the Hellenic world. Cythera and Cyprus, Phoenician trading stations both, were the foci of her expansion. The Odyssey speaks of her sanctuary at Paphos, and it was here that she gave omens in navigation and was worshipped as a calmer of the sea. At other shrines her aspect of earth was emphasized and the phallic maypole raised in her honour. Wherever she walked the turf was covered with flowers, especially the flowers she loved: the anenome, the myrtle and the rose. As Goddess of fecundity the animals were hers also, the lusty animals in particular: the ram, the goat, the rabbit and the dove. Thus she was not only Venus Genetrix, the guardian of the family, but also the Goddess of beauty, love and pleasure, patroness of courtesans. No less than a thousand priestesses served her shrine at Corinth.

Gradually this last aspect of hers predominates. Her moon and her spear pass to other hands. To Ceres she yields the bursting grain, and the flowers that sprang in her foot-prints to Flora and Persephone. Her attributes dwindle until there is nothing left but her own body—naked. She has no need of shield, or crown, or sceptre. The symbol of her empire is herself alone.

It is curious that the nude Venus comes from Babylonia and Chaldea. Istar was always naked; the archaic Greek Aphrodite is always clothed. As late as the period of Praxiteles the people of Cos were slightly scandalized when he offered them for their worship a Venus entirely nude. But such statues multiplied, emphasizing more and more the beauty of the forms in accordance with the age's erotic ideal. Sculptors vied with one another in the search for perfection, and the citizens of Athens did not hesitate to lend their daughters for models, sometimes two or three at a time, so that their individual beauties might be combined and the result fairer than any living woman. The famous courtesan Phryne was regarded as almost an incarnation of the Goddess and when, under the eyes of assembled multitudes, she bathed naked in the sea, she was playing at being Anadyomene. Truly the Gods of Greece had come down to earth.

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* From *The Golden Asse of Lucius Apuleius* translated by William Adlington, 1566. The original passage reads:

> 'Inde primigenii Phryges Pessinuntiam deum Matrem, hinc autochthones Attici Cecropeiam Minervam, illinc fluctuantes Cyprii Paphiam Venerem, Cretes sagittiferi Dictynnam Dianam, Siculi trilingues Stygiam Proserpinam, Eleusine vetustam deam Cererem, Iunonem alii, Bellonam alii, Hecatam isti, Rhamnusiam illi, et qui nascentis dei solis inchoantibus illustrantur radiis Æthiopes utrique priscaque doctrina pollentes Ægyptii caerimoniis me propriis percolentes, appellant vero nomine reginam Isidem.'

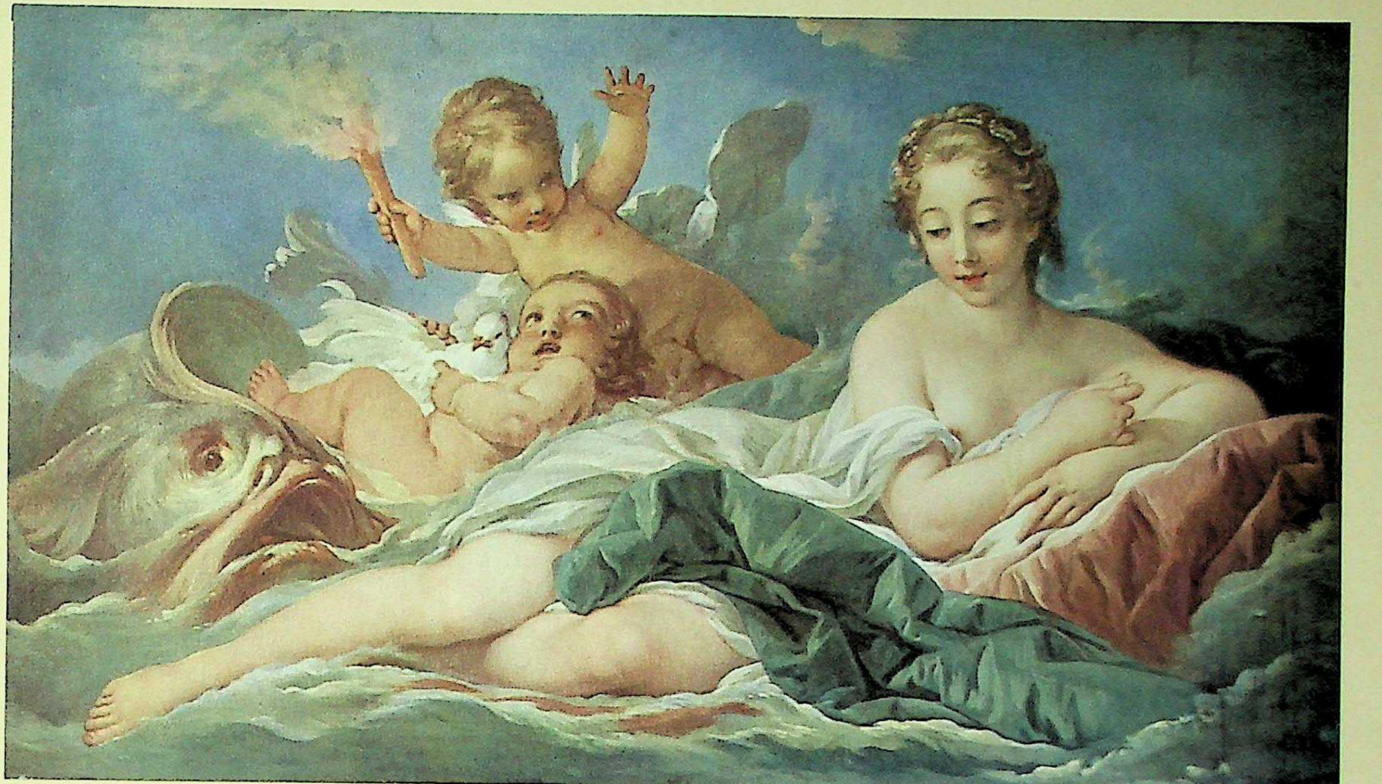

Plate 1. Boucher. *Birth of Venus.* See page 24

In the hands of the statuaries the Goddess of Love even developed a certain coquetry. The famous Venus de' Medici, a replica no doubt of earlier work, makes with her two hands the traditional gesture of modesty. It is interesting to note that some of the earliest Babylonian statues make a similar gesture, but with an opposite purpose, for there is no concealment in the early goddesses: they point to the sources of life. From such Garden of Eden innocence the contemporaries of Pericles had already travelled far.

They had also travelled far from their early *horror* of the Gods, at least so far as the Olympians were concerned. Venus was now the perfect woman, human, all too human. It was possible to discuss her ancestry and her marriage, and even to gossip about her *affaires*. An ancient legend made her the wife of Vulcan; it was common knowledge that she was the mistress of Mars. The ancients themselves disagreed as to the true father of Eros; and in such a matter who are we to decide? The legend of Vulcan's cuckoldom was to provide a theme for painters two thousand years later when the world, so to say, had reached once more the same degree of sophistication. For Vulcan, as the legend told, surprised the lovers while they were sleeping and, entangling them in a net, called the other Gods to come and see. And the Gods came, and saw, and laughed—at Vulcan.

In the Hellenistic Period, as we have noted, Venus merges once more into the Great Mother. All that was divine in her passed into the general cult, and for her human figure, it became an excuse for the sculptors to fashion the nude—a woman standing, crouching, tying her hair or busy with her toilet. Yet, although the divinity had fled from these Graeco-Roman figures, it did not save them from the fury of the Christian iconoclasts to whom beauty of body seemed incompatible with beauty of soul, and who regarded nudity itself as a temptation of the devil.

The human form indeed suffered a long eclipse; and the Dark Ages were over and the Middle Ages well advanced before any artist dared, or perhaps desired, to carve the naked bodies of either man or woman. To dissect a corpse was a crime, to draw from the living model a sin. The Adamites (those early Nudists) were put down with fire and sword; the Cathars, who dared to spell Roma backwards, suffered the fate of all heretics. When the nude first crept timidly back again in art, it did so by ignoring the Gods of the Ancients and calling itself the Human Soul (in the early sculptures of

The Last Judgment) or Adam and Eve.

There is a Romanesque Eve in the Cathedral of Magdeburg; early Gothic versions are at Bourges and Bamberg. All three show an ignorance of anatomy in which there is nothing to wonder at. Even when the dawning Renaissance brought the pagan legends back into literature, painting was still nervous of the old, proud nudity of the Gods. In a Florentine *Judgment of Paris* by one of the followers of Fra Angelico, the three fair competitors are clothed.

Yet gradually the inhibition faded. Guido of Siena, famous for his 'Greek taste', was painting nudities in the first quarter of the thirteenth century. Lanzi relates that Giotto decorated a palace with naked figures, free from any religious sentiment or moral lesson. The Louvre has a *Judgment of Paris* with nude figures, painted about 1320 by an unknown Bolognese. In the fifteenth century the flood-gates were opened. Masaccio is said to have been the first to paint the female figure entirely unclothed, but she was still an Eve. Squarcione travelled in Greece and Italy searching for statues and fragments of the antique and upon them founded the teaching in his art school where Mantegna was a pupil. In Signorelli's *Pan* a woman, innocently and nonchalantly naked, stands facing the spectator and blowing a pipe. We have also Piero di Cosimo's *Mars and Venus* in Berlin, and Lorenzo di Credi's naturalistic *Venus* in the Uffizi: and examples could be multiplied. In Botticelli's *Mars and Venus* in the National Gallery, the figure of Venus is clothed; but that is because the picture is wrongly titled (as Stephen Spender has emphasized in the Faber Gallery *Botticelli* where the picture is reproduced).

Botticelli introduced an entirely new sensibility into the painting of the nude. There is no need to linger over his *Birth of Venus*. It is familiar to everyone; and as it has already been reproduced in the volume just referred to, it is not included here. It is enough to note with Yukio Yashiro* that 'there is no conception of the female figure in Art so remote from Greek ideals as Botticelli's Venuses'. Their distortion—since Botticelli had ample opportunity of drawing from the living model—is deliberate; the hint of affectation in the pose, the loving calligraphy of the arabesque, the very choice of subject—the Botticelli girl, as one might call her without irreverence—is *voulu* in the highest degree. 'Every line of her body is a silver chord of high strung nerves conscious of its precious nakedness.'† No wonder she disturbed the peace of mind of Savonarola, and even of Botticelli himself.

It was on Shrove Tuesday 1496–97 that there occurred the famous 'Bonfire of Vanities'. 'Crying out every day in the pulpit, that lascivious pictures and music and amorous books often lead the thoughts to evil actions . . . . Fra Girolamo brought it about that on that day so great a number of paintings and sculptures of the nude, many by the hands of excellent masters, together with books, lutes and song-books were brought to that place (and burnt) that the loss was very great, and especially in painting; for Baccio brought all the drawings which he had made from the nude, and Lorenzo di Credi also followed his example.'

Vasari can hardly restrain his indignation as he tells the story, and, indeed, it seems a pity that the artists themselves should have been won over, if only for a moment, by the voice of fanaticism, and destroyed, with their own hands, so rich an inheritance. We might have lost both the *Birth of Venus* and the *Primavera* if they had not, most fortunately, been out of Florence at the time.

There was another bonfire the following year, and in 1498 a third, but this time the victim was Savonarola himself.

The tide of the Renaissance flowed on, and as art became more frankly secular, Venus as a decoration, Venus as an excuse, became almost a commonplace in princely palaces, even when the palaces were those of Cardinals and Popes. In the process she became, in a manner of speaking, more innocent. She lost her ambiguity, her self-consciousness, her *morbidezza*. The figures are either impossibly white and touchingly naïve, like Cranach's Venus in the landsknecht hat, or frank, opulent and pagan like those of the Venetians.

What a birth of Venuses in the first half of the sixteenth century! Palma Vecchio's Venus, resting in a landscape, is the great-great-grandmother not only of the *Naked Maja* of Goya, but of the *Odalisque* of Ingres. There is Titian's Venus (now in the Prado) listening to an organ; Titian's *Venus Reclining* (Plate 4) in the Uffizi; the lovely Bronzino group (Plate 2) in the National Gallery; the splendid Giorgione which belongs to the Dresden Gallery.

These are real women, sometimes recognizable portraits: the face of Violante looks out at us from the canvases of more than one master. King's mistresses did not disdain to pose as models; and Diane de Poitiers was as proud to be painted as Venus as, in a previous age, Agnes Sorel had been content to pose as the *Virgin of Melun*. The slim dark-haired Andalusian whom, later, Velasquez painted is a nobody (I speak in terms of *Who's Who*, not of the Registers of Immortality), but everybody can recognize Helena Fourment, Rubens's second wife, who performs the difficult feat of being not only Venus but Juno and Minerva too when her husband chose to look at her through the eyes of fabled Paris (Plate 7).

The mention of these facts reminds us how far Venus has travelled since the fumbling artist strove to disengage from the reluctant stone the first amulet of fertility in the shape of a woman. Between the Venus of Willendorf and the Venus of Velasquez is a gap big enough to swallow the whole of human history.

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* Yukio Yashiro, *Sandro Botticelli*, 1925.

† *Ibid.*

Or if not quite the whole of human history, at least that part of it which is comprised in man's ideal of woman, for which the name human eroticism is not a completely satisfactory term. For if woman, as our fathers fabled, is not born of man's rib (from the point of view of biology, indeed, the female precedes the male) at least she is fashioned in the image of man's desire, and in the various shapes which this projected image has assumed, the work of art has played the double rôle of stimulus and echo, almost of cause and effect.

Mother and mistress: these are the two termini of the pendulum's swing; woman the giver of life and woman the bestower of pleasure. And just as the Goddess gradually shed the first of these two functions so that she might preside more effectively over the second, so does man's imagination gradually put aside the aspect of fecundity. It would be absurd to say that it is the virginal quality of Venus that gradually predominates, but certainly in her later manifestations she is the mother of one child only, and its name is Love.

If the study of clothes should ever be placed upon a rational (that is to say, upon a psychological) foundation, it would be no paradox to begin by assembling a series of naked Venuses as the minds of artists have conceived them and the hands of artists given them visible form. Then would pass before our eyes a procession of ideal forms: slender and pliant as Botticelli's Simonetta, golden and opulent as Titian's Violante. We should see all that the contemporaries of François Premier admired in Diane de Poitiers, and all that the fellow-courtiers of Lely thought beautiful in the Countess of Castlemaine. We should smile with Boucher at the *espièglerie* of *la petite Morphile*; be frivolous with the *petites femmes* of Fragonard, and stern with David's Olympians. Ruthless with Goya, sentimental with Greuze, we should find our Venuses still stretching before us. From the hot sadistic colours of Delacroix we should pass to the cool arabesques of Ingres, and from the warm shadows of Fantin-Latour to the cold daylight of Manet. And we could say, with truth, to each: This is the kind of woman these men admired; this was the Venus-type that dominated their epoch.

How much could we not learn from such a succession of women? Could we not deduce from them the whole flavour of a period? This goddess lived, we could say, in an age of abounding vitality, this in an age of romantic passion, this in an age of elegant frivolity. These were the mothers of heroes and these the daughters of decadents. The Venuses that Boucher saw had passed through the *Parc aux cerfs*; and Burne-Jones's had just passed out from Girton. What magic is in the imagination of man that he can effect these transformations! And what plasticity in the body of woman!

There is a fashion in the forms of clothes and a fashion in the forms of the women who wear them; and in nothing is the abiding power of Venus more completely revealed. This is her pet device, to be a very Proteus, changing her shape whenever misguided reformers try to reform her out of existence, or purblind moralists seek to pin her down. When need be she will assume a coif or a wimple, reveal or conceal her shoulders and her breasts, hide behind fans, play at demureness, braid her hair or let it fall loose about her, show her lithe limbs or merely suggest their existence. What cares she for veils and enveloping draperies? She knows that the beauty shines through.

The Venus images here reproduced, suggested for the most part by the editor of the series, range from the late fifteenth century to the early twentieth. When the first of them was born the Renaissance was still a bud, a flower in husk, feeling in its still fragile stem the rising sap of the dawn of Humanism. When the last of them was painted Humanism had declined into the candle-light of decadence. The great adventure was coming to an end. Man was no longer the measure of all things; he had been dwarfed by his own Faustian inventions.

When Sellaio painted, the earth was still the centre of the Universe; when Rubens painted man was still a unique creation; even in the days of Burne-Jones man's soul, at least, still seemed a unity. The first illusion was destroyed by Copernicus, the second by Darwin, the last by Freud. What remains of the primal impulse? For we live by our illusions and, when we have no more, we die. That is the only reason why mankind has to go to the trouble of being born over and over again. Only so can he regain his momentary spring-time, and find the way back to the primeval garden.

But the world into which he now grows up is a world swept and garnished, replete with every modern convenience except an adequate lock to keep out the seven devils who are already knocking at the door. As Jung has told us, we suffer from an unprecedented impoverishment of symbolism, and it is just here that the danger lies.

Modern materialists, who have argued themselves out of understanding, cherish the childish notion that the Gods die when once their shrines are neglected. On the contrary they are never so dangerous as when men no longer know where to find them, and when their names cannot be used to conjure them back. Then they are free, free to escape back to the Unconscious, where all their *mana* is renewed and their old potency restored to them.

The image of Venus no longer stands in our temples, we no more hang her amulets round our children's necks, the taste for 'classical subjects' in painting has declined and artists no longer use her image and her legend even as an excuse; but until the race of man is almost run, Venus will not abandon her kingdom or grow weary of the homage that is her due.

Plate 2

IL BRONZINO

(1503—1572)

Venus, Cupid, Folly, Jealousy, Pleasure and Time

London: National Gallery
57 in. × 45½ in.

Vasari, drawing to the end of his great work and having, as he says, 'written the lives of the most eminent painters, sculptors and architects, who have passed to a better life, from the time of Cimabue down to the present day', resolved to say something about his own contemporaries and friends 'beginning with the first and oldest . . . the Florentine painter, Agnolo, called Il Bronzino, a truly excellent artist, and one most worthy of all praise'.

Agnolo Allori was born at Monticelli near Florence in 1502. His first important master was Pontormo and him he assisted in various works in Florence, culminating in the decorations for the marriage of Cosimo I, Grand Duke of Tuscany, to Eleanora of Castile. This work included a number of chiaroscuro paintings in imitation of bas-reliefs in bronze and these were so much admired that Agnolo was ever afterwards called 'Il Bronzino'.

There is something of the bas-relief in the picture here reproduced, both in the linear pattern, in the shallow recession and in the slight crowding together of the figures (although it is possible that the canvas has been a little cut down). Bronzino had already painted the portraits (and he was an admirable portrait painter) of the whole Grand-ducal family when Cosimo commissioned this picture which was sent to France as a present for Francis I. 'This,' says Vasari, 'represented a nude figure of Venus embraced by her son Cupid; the Pleasures, Loves, and Sports are on one side; and on the other, Fraud, Jealousy, and Passions of similar character.' Even to contemporaries the allegory seems to have been a trifle obscure.

Venus and Cupid are plain enough, and the charming amorino about to throw the roses at them, is usually called Folly. Time, if the bearded man be Time, is about to shroud Love by a cloth which Pleasure (with grapes twined in her hair) tries vainly to hold back. Jealousy, behind Cupid, tears her hair. Behind Folly, and driving him on, is a Harpy with a girl's face, serpent's body and clawed feet, who holds forth a honeycomb in one hand and conceals a poisoned sting in the other—a symbol it has been suggested of 'vain desire and fitful passion'. Whether Francis understood it so is not known. But the picture certainly became one of the starting points for a French Renaissance in painting, the so-called School of Fontainebleau.

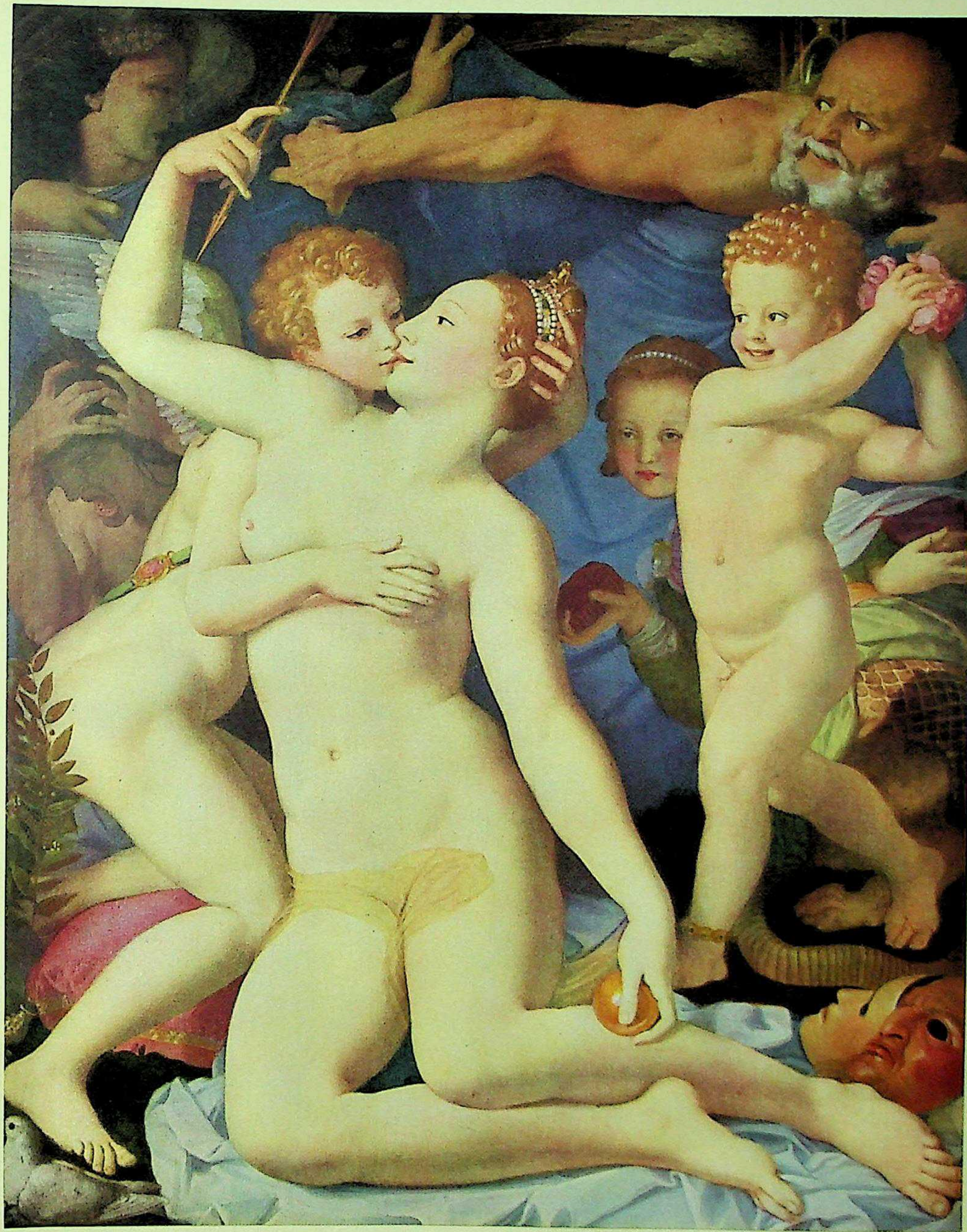


Plate 3

JACOPO DEL SELLAIO

(1442—1493)

Venus and Cupids

London: National Gallery
36½ in. × 68 in.

This picture shows us Venus in one of her less usual aspects: as Goddess of Fecundity. She herself is pregnant, and the bunch of grapes held by the cupid is also a symbol. So is the pomegranate in the crook of her right arm, the pomegranate having always been emblematic of increase from the multitude of its seeds.

The older text-books have very little to say of Jacopo del Sellaio. His surviving pictures were lumped together with those of other 'Amici di Sandro', friends and disciples of Botticelli. Now some fifty works have been disentangled from the heap and have been, at least tentatively, ascribed to him.

We know that he was born in Florence. His father bore the charming name of Arcangelo; he was a saddler, hence the name del Sellaio. When Jacopo was barely twenty he was inscribed among the members of the Compagnia di San Luca, or, as we should say, became an A.R.A. He died in Florence and was buried in San Frediano. If any of his paintings perished in Savonarola's 'Bonfire of Vanities' he did not live to see their destruction. He left a son who was also an artist and who, like his grandfather, was called Arcangelo.

As a painter he was an eclectic, striving to combine the manner of Fra Filippo, Botticelli and Ghirlandaio, but it is to Botticelli that his debt is most marked. His hand is less sure, his linear pattern more angular, his figures a trifle stiff. His roses look as if they had been made of paper, and he is a little clumsy in his handling of the attendant cupids. A different atmosphere would have been created if his Venus had seated herself a little more comfortably on the greensward and tucked in her feet; but with its Tuscan landscape, its air of early morning, its crystalline perspective, the picture has dignity and considerable charm.

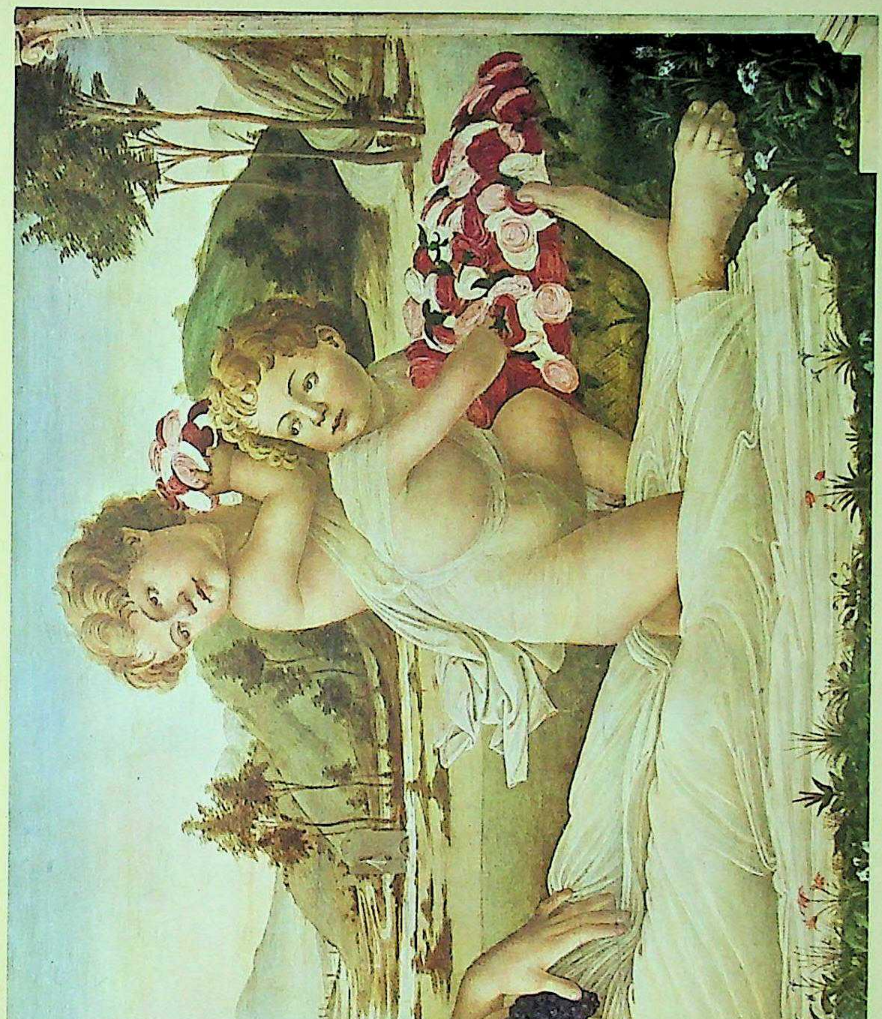


Plate 4

TITIAN

(1480?—1576)

The Venus of Urbino

Florence: Uffizi

41 in. × 60 in.

That there should ever have been a sovereign state of Urbino is no doubt deplorable to the political philosopher; yet the art historian cannot but be grateful to such minor principalities. Such have sometimes been veritable forcing houses for the arts, and their rulers were often able to manifest the combined virtues of the public and the private patron: the power of the one, and the taste of the other.

It is probable that we are justified in identifying the *Venus of Urbino*, one of the most famous of Titian's paintings, with the nude known to have been delivered to Guidobaldo II, the son of Francesco Maria, after the death of his father, about the year 1538. Indeed there is not much room for controversy about this particular picture. The difficulties begin when we try to relate it to its counterpart: that other *Venus of Dresden* about which there has been so much dispute. The pose is the same, or almost the same (the position of the hands being slightly different), but the background has changed. In the earlier painting it is a dream-landscape; in the later picture it is a rich interior with two maid-servants ransacking a coffer, evidently for Venus's clothes (the standing figure already has her dress flung over her shoulder).

Now the *Venus of Urbino* is entirely Titian's own, but the *Venus of Dresden* is Giorgione's, or so many scholars have thought. But, in any case, it was almost certainly finished by Titian, and the entire painting was once attributed to him. This little problem in expertise would be out of place in the present study if it did not raise an important point not only in the evolution of Titian's genius, but in the development of the Venus legend.

We have called Giorgione's background a dream-landscape. So it is, and the figure that reclines therein is a goddess. She dwells in some remote region of her own; she is dreaming; her eyes are closed. But the *Venus of Urbino* is awake, and in awaking she has entered the world of reality. She is no longer a goddess, but a woman.

Efforts have even been made to identify her; and, indeed, it seems likely that she is the same that Titian painted as *La Bella*, who still queens it at the Pitti in her splendid gown of blue and gold and purple. The *Venus of Urbino* has ceased to be a goddess to become the apotheosis of woman. Soon she will rise and put on her clothes and her jewels, and become, once more, simply *La Bella* who, for a few hours, *posed* as Venus.

Plate 5

VENETIAN SCHOOL

Venus and Adonis and the Story of Myrrha

London: National Gallery
30¼ in. ×52 in.

The legend of Adonis is familiar to every schoolboy however little he may understand of its implications, but the 'Story of Myrrha' awakens no immediate echo in the minds even of those familiar with the classics. Even among the Ancients it was not universally known, for Apollodorus himself (our authority for so much) calls Adonis the son of Cinyras and Medarme, which means nothing to anyone. We have to go to the cyclic poet Panyasius to learn that Adonis was the offspring of Theias, King of Assyria and Smyrna, that is Myrrha.

Myrrha, it seems, had neglected the worship of Aphrodite (a neglect even now not without its dangers) and had been punished for it by falling in love with her own father. When he discovered that he had lain with his own daughter he wished to kill her, but she fled from him. Pursued, and about to be taken, she prayed to the gods to make her invisible. She was accordingly

> Turn'd into a Myrrhe
> Whose dropping Liquor ever weepes for her

(as Drayton sings in his Heroic Epistle). Nine months later the tree burst asunder and Adonis was born. These incidents can be made out in the background of the picture here reproduced.

As for the story of Adonis, let a forgotten Herbalist give the old tale a new twist:

'Venus loved the younker Adonis better than the warrior Mars (who loved Venus with all his force and might) but when Mars perceived that Venus loved Adonis better than him, he slew Adonis, thinking by this means, to cause Venus not only to forgo, but also to forget her friend Adonis, and so to love Mars only: of the which thing, when Venus had warning how and where it should be accomplished, she was suddenly moved and hastily ran to have rescued Adonis, but taking no care of the way, at a sudden, ere she was ware, she threw herself upon a bed or thicket of white roses, where as with sharp cruel thorns, her tender feet were so pricked and wounded, that the blood sprang out abundantly, wherewithal when the roses were bedewed and sprinkled, they became all red, the which colour they do yet keep . . . according to the quantity of the blood that fell upon them in remembrance of the clear and pleasant Venus.'

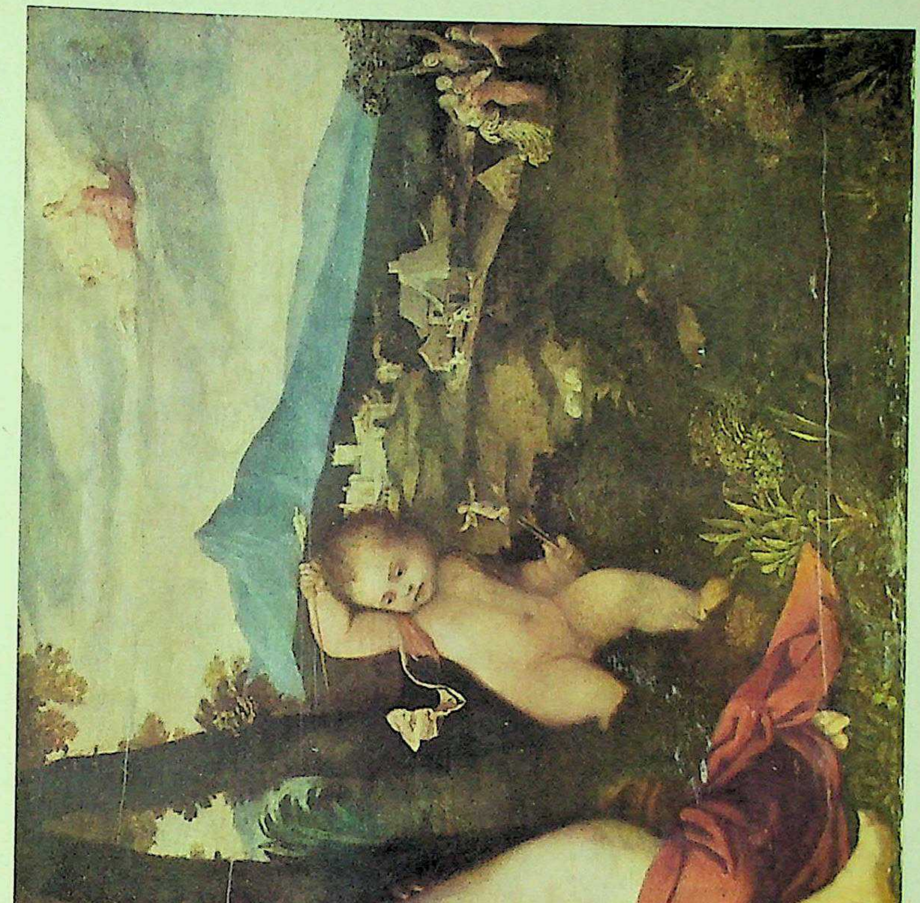


Plate 6

GUIDO RENI

(1575—1642)

The Toilet of Venus

London: National Gallery
111 in. × 81 in.

Venus traditionally had the Graces as her lady's maids, and Homer tells us that when she fell in love with Anchises and carried him off to Paphos, these same damsels decked and perfumed her for his embraces. In this picture maybe they are preparing her for this caprice. But the artist has been chiefly concerned to make a rhythmic pattern of light shapes against the dark background and to evolve a curious colour scheme.

For the rest the scene is as human and worldly as Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. Here is no goddess whose radiant beauty requires no adornment. She needs a pearl bracelet bound about her wrist and blue fillets to her sandals and a choice of Renaissance pendants neatly arranged in a jewel case beside her.

Guido Reni is one of those painters who will probably never recover the popularity they once enjoyed. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries he was regarded, especially in England, as one of the greatest Italian Masters. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth that his reputation began to decline. It is now perhaps at its lowest ebb.

This modern judgment is not altogether just. As a typical product of Bologna (he was born near the town in 1575 and died there in 1642) he naturally studied under the Carracci, and carried on their tradition of eclecticism. Bologna was a real cross-roads, both geographically and culturally. From Florence he learned his line; from Venice his arabesque; from Naples came his chiaroscuro; yet he was able to combine all these elements to form his characteristic personal style. His facility and rapidity of execution were extraordinary.

Considered as a kind of dance-rhythm the picture before us is an astonishing *tour de force*. The four principal figures are full of movement, not the mechanically synchronized movement of a row of dancing girls, but the four-patterns-in-one-pattern which constitutes the *pas de quatre*. All these swirling lines revolve around one centre: they are the ring round Cupid's ring. And the point where the amorino makes his symbolic gesture is precisely where Golden Section cuts Golden Section. The picture is a ready-made demonstration-piece for the devotees of the Diagonal and the amateurs of the *Nombre d'Or*.

Yet one cannot avoid an uneasy suspicion that this *Toilet of Venus* began by being something else. Surely the expression on the face of the goddess is a trifle over-ecstatic for what is taking place. Did the picture by any chance start by being the martyrdom of a female saint, and did the patron change his mind?

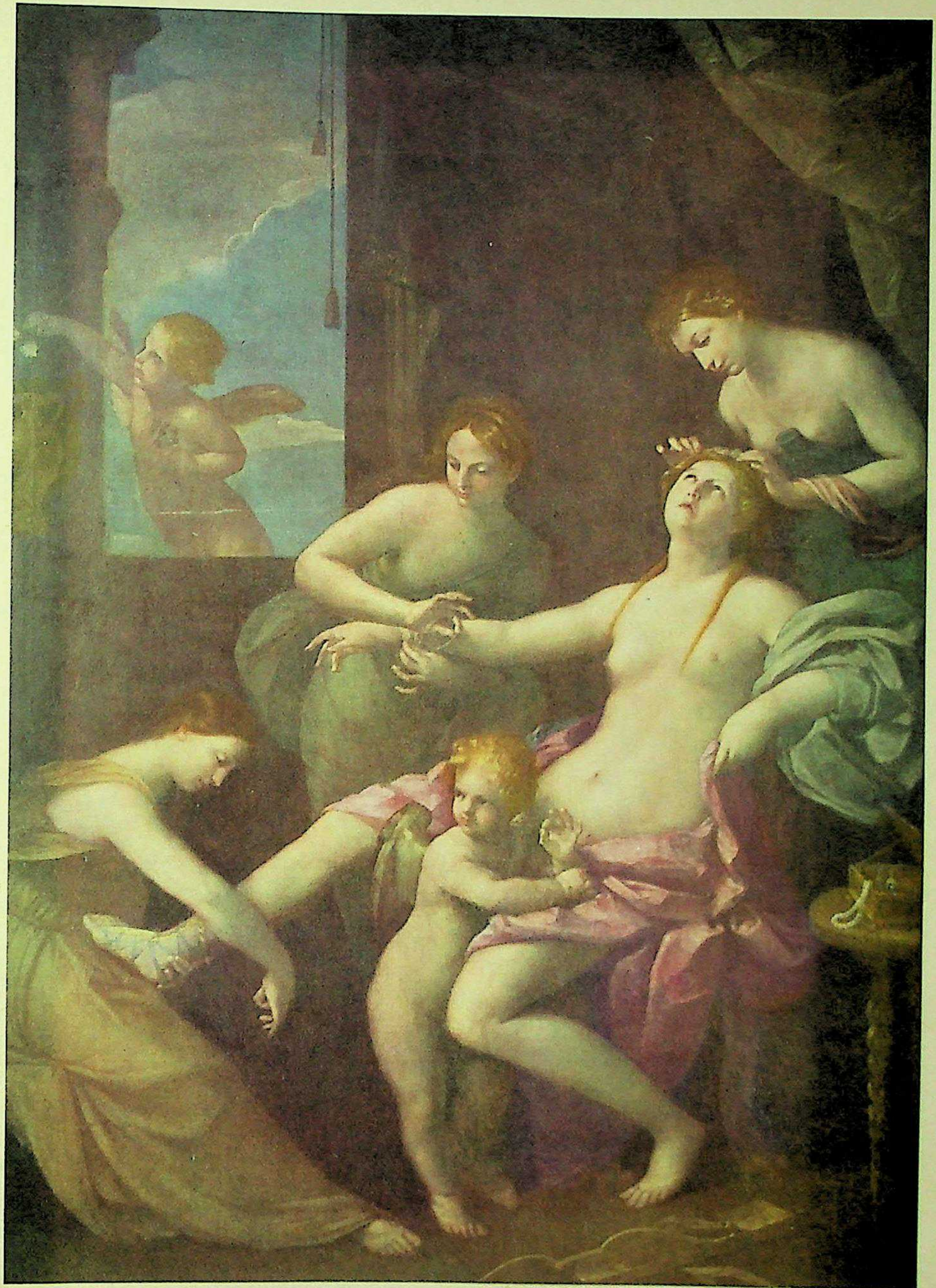


Plate 7

RUBENS

(1577—1640)

The Judgment of Paris

London: National Gallery

57 in. × 75 in.

Mythology was a great help to painters of the Renaissance and their immediate successors, and the subject of the *Judgment of Paris* in particular offered an opportunity for three paintings of the nude, sometimes from the same model, as probably in the picture by Rubens here reproduced. The 'sitter' was almost certainly his second wife Helena Fourment. Isabella Brant, his first wife, posed for him too, but she died in the early sixteen-twenties and the date of this painting is 1635 or 1636.

By that time Helena was a fine-looking woman of opulent curves; in fact her curves have given rise to a certain prejudice against the paintings of Rubens in periods obsessed by Botticelli or Burne-Jones. The ideal of female beauty varies widely from age to age; but our own feelings (if we have them) in favour of the slim mannequin figure cannot blind us to the splendid bravura of the great Fleming.

In the cloudy background flies Discord, rather unnecessarily, since she had made her contribution to the imbroglio some time earlier by flinging the golden apple into the midst of a banquet of the gods. 'To the Fairest' ran the inscription, and Venus, Juno and Minerva each claimed it as her own. Jupiter, anxious for a quiet life, directed Mercury to conduct all three goddesses to Mount Ida there to submit their rival charms to the judgment of the shepherd Paris.

It would be pleasant to think as he sits there pondering his verdict and apparently still undecided where to bestow the apple—it would be pleasant to think that he was at least *trying* to be a righteous judge. Alas! mythology teaches otherwise. All three goddesses had offered him a bribe and what he was really deciding was which bribe to accept. Should it be wisdom, power or—Helen of Troy. Of course he chose Helen of Troy and thereby became the first of a long line of romantic heroes, caused the Trojan War, made Egypt a Roman province, inspired the Troubadours, made the fortune of paper-makers and ink manufacturers, increased the profits of circulating libraries and founded the fortunes of Hollywood. And it all began with an apple—or is that another story?

Plate 8

FRANÇOIS BOUCHER

(1703—1770)

Venus and Vulcan

London: Wallace Collection

64½ in. × 32½ in.

Boucher's four upright panels for a boudoir (of which the painting here reproduced is one) were painted in 1754 when the master was just over fifty. It was twenty-one years since he had married Marie-Jeanne Buseau, who was then seventeen. For the first few years of their married life he painted only from her and even when he had found other models her face and figure still continued to haunt his canvases. So it is probable that we are still seeing, in this picture, '*sa très petite tête aux cheveux blonds et courts*' and her '*jeune poitrine de déesse aux seins menus*'.

The painting represents Venus *visiting* Vulcan, presumably *before* their marriage, as he seems to have knocked off work in order to present her with a blue ribbon. This marriage of Venus and Vulcan, indeed, has always presented certain difficulties to the commentators. Venus and Mars, yes! since 'Love is a kind of war'; and military men always seem to have a special effect on the female heart. All the nice girls love a—soldier, but never, surely, an arms manufacturer, as such.

However, if love will find a way, learning will find a reason and perhaps we cannot do better than rely upon a certain J. Wallis, Junior, editor of the 'Universal Juvenile Library', who, in 1809, brought out a child's guide to mythology and dedicated it to the Princess Charlotte. 'The Ancients,' he tells us, 'worshipped the visible parts of the Universe by the name of Venus', and he continued:

'Vulcan is probably the symbol of ingenuity. It is natural for ingenuity to have been pleased with the beauty and harmony of the Universe, and being constantly engaged in admiring it, he was said to have married Venus: a metaphor not overstrained.' A metaphor not overstrained! After such an exercise in ingenuity Vulcan himself must look to his laurels.

Boucher, I fancy, was very little concerned with such problems. Basing himself upon the curves and 'carmines' of Marie-Jeanne, he was merely concerned to paint a charming decorative panel which would harmonize with the elegances of some rococo boudoir or bedroom. And who can deny that what he did produce found its perfect setting amid ormolu and the rocaille frivolities? Fortunately the picture is even yet not entirely divorced from such surroundings; in the Wallace Collection it takes its natural place.

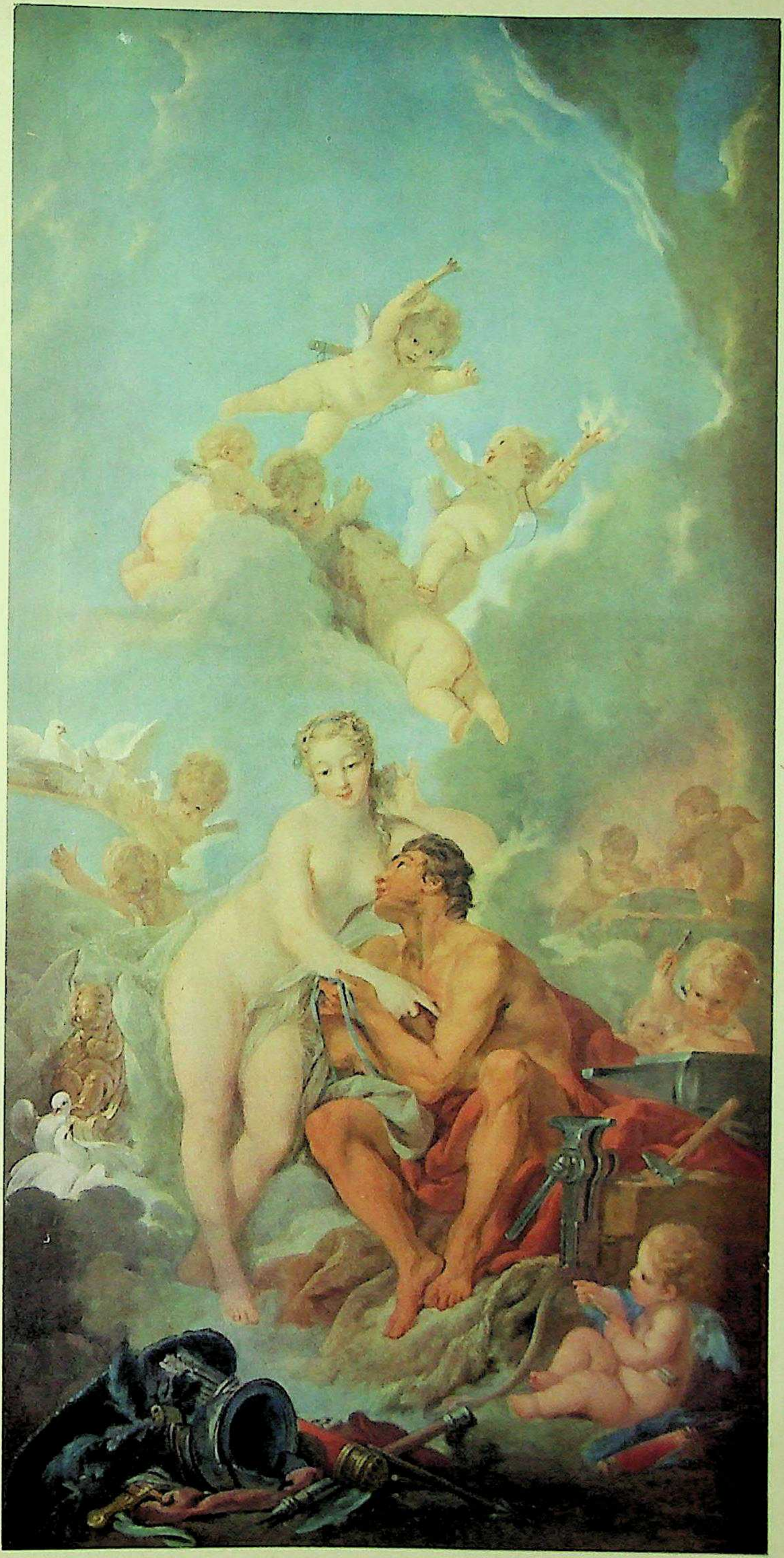


Plate 9

SIR EDWARD BURNE-JONES

(1833—1898)

The Mirror of Venus

The Great British Public did not really wake up to the existence of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement—except as the private cult of a few eccentrics, to be ridiculed and shot at—until the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877; and, by that time, the Pre-Raphaelites were dispersed. When Rossetti, the real leader of the Movement, was asked to exhibit he refused, and so the laurels which might have been his were gathered by a painter of the second generation: Burne-Jones. It was he, and not Rossetti or Ford Madox Brown, who set the tone of the annual exhibitions and so condemned English taste to the 'greenery-yallery' of the Aesthetes.

In the first Grosvenor Gallery Burne-Jones showed two *Mirrors of Venus*: a small one, begun as early as 1867, and a large one (here reproduced) on which he had been working since 1873. It was his practice to spend years over his pictures. Both were an instant success. Leyland (for whom Whistler painted the *Peacock Room*) bought the larger version, and at his sale a few years later it changed hands for the then prodigious sum of 3,570 guineas.

The modern world has not yet recovered its delight in Burne-Jones, and it needs a certain effort of the imagination to realize the impact of his pictures when they were first shown to the public. Perhaps it was their strange blend of the classical, or pseudo-classical, form with the mediaeval impulse. As Malcolm Bell wrote more than fifty years ago: 'His classical figures with their surroundings are such as Chaucer imagined them, his Troy is that of Dares Phrygius and Dictys Cretensis, not of Homer or Virgil.' And through these two distorting glasses we peer into a world wholly of the imagination, a world of pale forms and androgyne expressions, where everything is very strange and beautiful, and everybody is very sad. Venus herself has vanished, leaving only her mirror behind, a mirror that a breath of wind will ruffle and destroy. And round the mirror gather young women who are already ghosts, with 'lustie thoughts full of great longinge,' as Chaucer wrote, with a more robust intention, in 'The Cuckoo and the Nightingale'.

> And of that longing commeth hevinesse,
> And thereof groweth grete sicknesse
> And for lack of that that they desire
> And thus in Maye ben hertes set on fire.

But with a pale, cold radiance as if the fire itself were but an image in a glass.

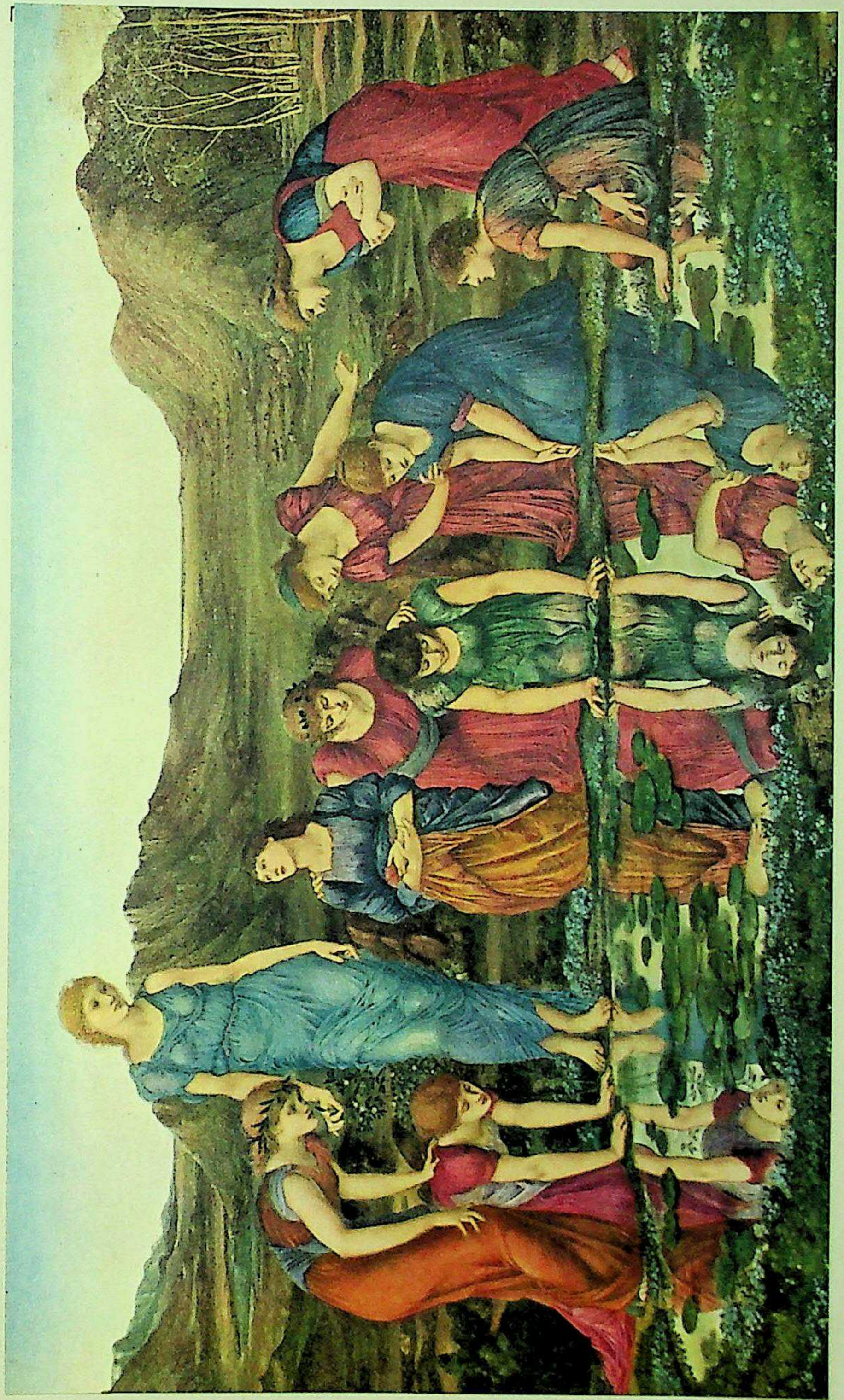


Plate 10

P. W. STEER

(1860—1942)

The Toilet of Venus

London: Tate Gallery
100 in. × 72 in.

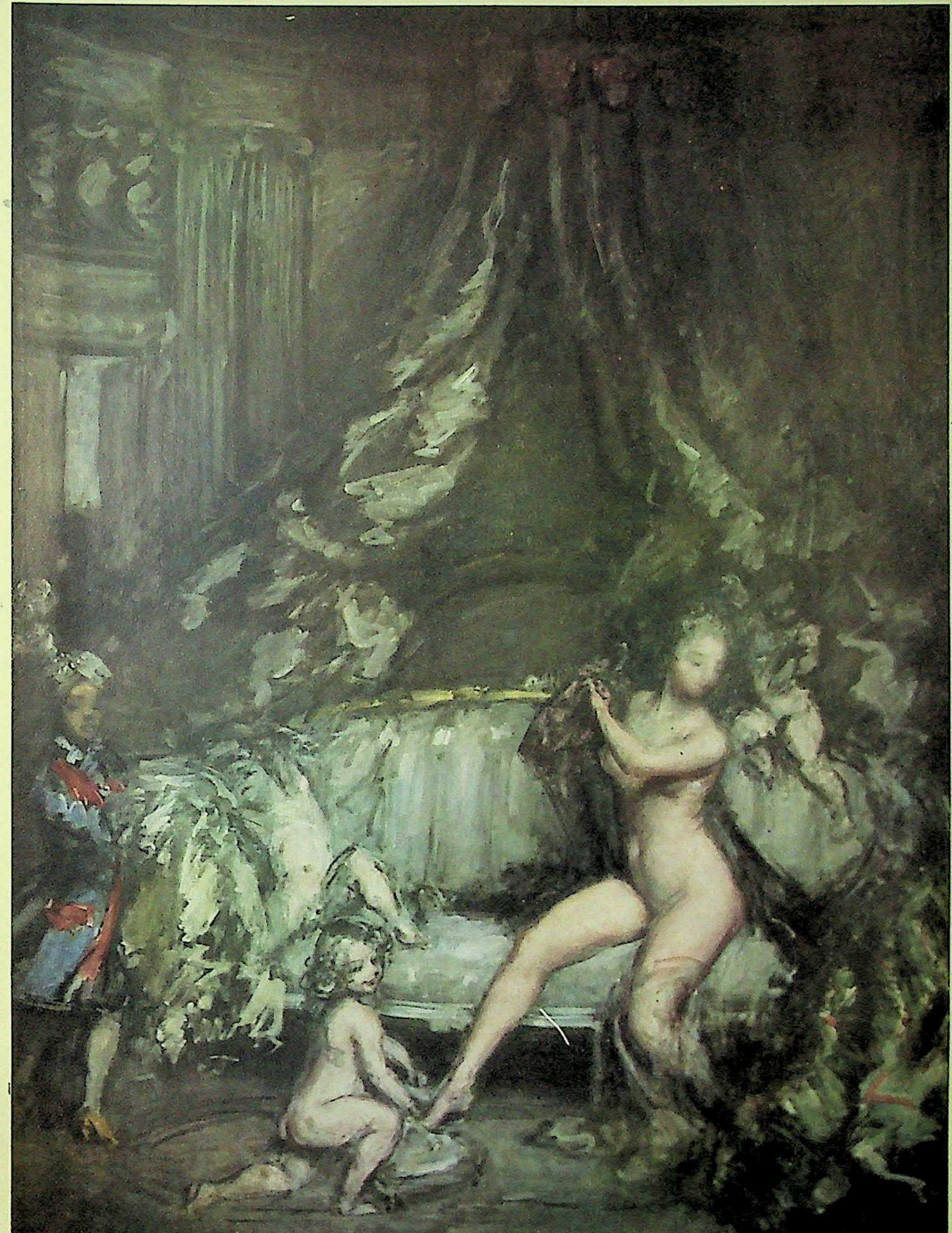
It was always something of a mystery to his admirers that the work of the painter Steer should fall into two divisions, so oddly different in feeling and handling. On the one hand they were presented with a series of water-colour landscapes, effects of light so evanescent that they seemed to be about to disappear altogether, pale washes of colour floated on to paper with an apparent *insouciance*, belying the skill which had set them precisely where they were. On the other hand there were boudoir pictures painted not indeed in the manner, but certainly in the spirit, of Boucher.

Conscious, as Boucher was not, of the inadequate lighting of eighteenth century rooms—or is it because he was moving all the time in a world of ghosts?—Steer loved to bathe in shadow his rococo beds, the rich curtains descending in a cascade from the plumed *ciel*, a gilded moulding catching the light, a black page with feathered turban and embroidered coat bringing in the chocolate, a hint of rumpled bed-clothes and of garments flung in disorder, and in the middle of all this, a single naked figure, attended perchance by cupids, some of them little girls.

Pastiche can be a new creation and Steer was of sufficient stature to make it so. There was an element of pastiche in Boucher also; and what we are catching here is the echo of an echo; we are admitted by the magic of art to a hidden chamber—a dream within a dream within a dream.

In appearance Steer was the last man in the world to suggest this particular *rêve intérieur*. Physically, he was the very antithesis of the *petit maître*—a big heavy man given to rough tweeds, thick boots and a strong pipe. His lack of conversation was a standing joke among his friends. In the picture which Tonks painted of George Moore reading to a circle of intimates in his house, Steer is shown in the background—he always sat in the background—fast asleep.

Or perhaps he was not really asleep, but merely allowing his thoughts to wander to the chosen country of the imagination. Perhaps he had merely left his lumbering body behind while his agile fancy strayed from the impeccable prose of Ebury Street to the peccant poetry of eighteenth-century France. If so we are the richer for it, for pictures such as the one here reproduced give us the sophisticated pleasure of looking at one age through the eyes of another.



Note on Plate 1
FRANÇOIS BOUCHER
(1703—1770)
The Birth of Venus
London: Wallace Collection
31½ in. × 54 in.

The Greeks had it that the birth of Venus from the sea foam took place on the coast of Phoenicia and that the goddess was carried thence to Cyprus on a shell (as Botticelli has depicted her). But here she makes the passage reposing it would seem on satin draperies, with dolphins providing the jet propulsion and cupids as linkmen.

This *Birth of Venus* was painted in 1754, when the sun of the Pompadour's favour shone most warmly and Boucher was at his most prolific. It is the pendant to another picture, also in the Wallace Collection, *Venus with Cupid and Doves*. Both panels were painted for the decoration of a boudoir.

We have moved a long way from the conception of Hesiod. This is no primitive goddess, nor even the shy nymph of Botticelli's picture, but the fine cut flower of an excessively sophisticated civilization: as exquisite a piece of porcelain as if she had been modelled in Sèvres. Rousseau had not yet dissolved the sugarcake of the *Rococo* into the gluey mass of his own *sensiblerie*.

Perhaps it is a vain effort to speculate on the exact personalities of Boucher's sitters, yet it is very tempting to do so in the present instance; and a little juxtaposition of dates, if it does not completely convince, may still stimulate the imagination. When Fragonard became Boucher's apprentice, the master had just installed himself in a new studio, in the Rue de Richelieu, near the Palais Royal. Among other models were three sisters named Murphy or, as the French spelt it, Morphi. The eldest, Victoire, was a *danseuse* at the Opera, the second was a professional model, and the third, Hélène, was when Casanova visited the studio, '*une petite souillon d'environ treize ans*': *la petite Morphile*. She it was who, when she was sixteen, attracted the attention of the King himself. This was in 1753 and it is tempting to think that Boucher's picture was already *en train* when the gilded coach drove up to the door and carried off this new Cinderella. If so it must be the last painting for which she posed, for, when her short reign of three years was over, she did not return to the studio. Louis, ever generous, gave her a handsome *dot*. She married '*un officier breton*' and passed out of both art and history.

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